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SUBJECT: TURKEY: SENIOR AKP INSIDERS SEND PM ERDOGAN STRONG  
MESSAGES TO CORRECT COURSE

Classified By: A/Political Counselor Kelly Degnan for reasons 1.4(b)(d)

11. (C) Summary and comment. Three senior members of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) are separately sending strong messages to PM Erdogan to pursue confidence building measures and decrease tensions that have polarized Turkey. AKP MP Vehit Erdem, former Deputy PM Abdullatif Sener and Deputy PM Cemil Cicek (the latter in an "anonymous" interview) separately criticized party tactics that led to the filing of a case to close AKP. Each called for measures to ease tensions and restore stability. The party's strategy remains unclear, with continued calls for amending the political parties law or early general elections. Erdogan, who has been meeting with groups of party members since the case was filed, is working hard to instill confidence in his leadership and retain his charismatic, iron grip on the party, despite his potential rivals' calls for "self-criticism" and compromise. End summary and comment.

CICEK: "WE'VE MADE MISTAKES BUT THEY CAN BE CORRECTED"

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12. (C) In an April 28 interview with Milliyet columnist Fikret Bila, a senior minister, widely thought to be Deputy PM Cemil Cicek, admitted AKP has made mistakes but added, "since the important thing is Turkey's interests, those mistakes can be corrected." Closing AKP will throw Turkey's economy into crisis and damage political progress in Turkey's southeast region, he predicted, warning those behind AKP's closure to think carefully about the impact. Acknowledging that a sector of society is concerned about eroding secularism, he proposed a confidence building package that lifts obstacles to education like the headscarf but addresses secularists' concerns as well. "If there are complains about any ministers, such as the Minister of Education and Health, they might be replaced," he said. Legislative measures clearly stating the headscarf will not be allowed in primary and secondary schools or in government places would be other confidence building measures. "The secular sensitivities of the people who are skeptical of the AK party should be soothed," he said. The AKP closure case will continue but the public will see a will to eliminate tensions.

SENER: "THERE IS NOTHING ERDOGAN CAN DO"

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13. (C) Former Deputy PM Abdullatif Sener, an AKP founding member who declined to run for parliament last July, was more pessimistic about AKP's ability to correct course. He told us May 2 he fully expects AKP to be closed, with the Constitutional Court decision coming in November or December,

despite AKP efforts to speed up the process. "It isn't up to the party," Sener said, "They can only shorten the process by a month or so." Sener, who admitted his relations with Erdogan are not good, added, "There is nothing Erdogan can do at this point. People are saying, 'three of your parties have been closed before - why didn't you act more wisely?'" Explaining why he didn't run for parliament, Sener said he didn't want to fight publicly with Erdogan over party tactics. "I tried to get the party to do self-criticism," he said. When that failed, he decided to speak out publicly, which created "noise" within the party. Sener, who seems open to serving should Erdogan be side-lined, expects some AKP MPs will shift to other parties if AKP closes. He put AKP's core support at 28% and suggested AKP might lose votes if early elections are held. "When the economy gets bad, people will not think about the closure case," he said. "They'll put the blame on the government."

ERDEM: "WE NEED TO REASSURE SOCIETY SECULARISM IS SAFE UNDER AKP"

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14. (C) Vahit Erdem, AKP Kirikkale MP and Chairman of parliament's NATO Parliamentary Assembly, echoed Sener's call for self-criticism. "It is time to speak out if we are to pass through this without harming Turkey," he said. "Everyone makes mistakes but I don't believe AKP's mistakes warrant its being closed down. We need to be self-critical; there are fears that AKP is a pro-religion party that will introduce fundamentalism. I had said we needed to grapple with this fear but we failed to do so," leading to an increase in extreme nationalism during AKP's rule. "AKP should shape itself up and realize reforms that would be useful for Turkey, speed up the EU process, take necessary

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economic measures and then, in 3 or 4 years time, go to elections."

15. (C) Erdem's April 25 interview with a local daily caused a stir, particularly within AKP, by stating Turkey would be better off if AKP had won 280-285 MPs in the July 2007 general elections (vice 341). A more balanced parliament would have elected a president through consensus, he explained. "What mattered was not who became president but that the country went through the process without tension," he said. Erdogan's failure to seek compromise following the elections led to domestic confusion with impacts on the economy, foreign policy and EU accession. Erdem told the daily AKP went the wrong way on lifting the headscarf ban by resorting to amending the constitution rather than letting rectors resolve the issue. "We cannot overcome each problem by amending the constitution."

15. (C) Clearly anxious about Erdogan's reaction to his interview, Erdem walked a careful line with us. "I gave a message to everyone, not just AKP, that we must look at our mistakes," he told us, noting he had discussed the interview (after publication) with DPM Cemil Cicek and Hayati Yazici. Erdem said it is "impossible" for AKP to turn Turkey into a religious society but added the party had failed to win the confidence of all of society. "We shouldn't deal with sensitive issues like the headscarf; we should deal with the economy, foreign policy, unemployment," he said. Erdem, who expects the Constitutional Court to punish but not ban AKP by halting state funding, said the party's defense should reassure society that secularism is safe under AKP rule. "We need to convince those who are worried about secularism," he stressed. Noting there are "responsible people" on the Constitutional Court, Erdem said he believes the court will give the "correct" decision, which he expects to be released in September or October, well before the March 2009 local elections. "Prolonging the process will harm Turkey," he said, adding, "Everyone should act responsibly," including AKP. "No matter how shrill the opposition is, we need to develop good dialogue with them," Erdem, noted. "In Turkey, everything depends on the economy and stability, including

votes."

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